

AMAZING UNTOLD STORIES OF CATALOGUES

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At the 2008 TBA (Time-Based Art (TBA) Festival in Portland, Oregon, I saw two productions that put a serious crimp in my long-standing skepticism about “postdramatic theater.” One was a six-hour piece (originally from 1996) called *Quizoola!* by the British experimental theatre company Forced Entertainment, and the other was a new, fifty-minute work by that company’s artistic director, Tim Etchells, *Sight is the Sense That Dying People Tend to Lose First*, written for and performed by the New York actor Jim Fletcher.

Both these works were squarely in the vein of the German scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann’s much-discussed “postdramatic” paradigm for the cutting edge in international theatrical innovation during the past several decades. I am not a habitual user of this term, as many have become since Lehmann’s book appeared in English in 2006. “Postdramatic” becomes a Procrustean absurdity when applied indiscriminately. It seems to me just the right description, however, for the kind of artist or group whose work really is driven by a loss of patience with drama per se. Companies in the vein of Forced Entertainment have broken faith with the very idea that staged fictional stories can ever operate with powerful critical force in a media-saturated world where story-patterns are cheapened by overexposure and audiences are chronically distracted by peripheral matters like self-referentiality and celebrity worship. Since 1984, this group has negotiated such obstacles by staging the failure of various performances to take conventional or traditionally entertaining shape.

In *First Night* (2001), for example, eight performers were dressed up as if for a bright and lively vaudeville performance—promising singing, dancing and comedy—but in fact they had no such acts prepared. With their mouths frozen in broad, grimace-like smiles, they vamped for ninety minutes with disconnected anecdotes, verbal attacks on the audience, and ominous predictions about the future. *Bloody Mess* (2003) worked from a similar premise except that its ten performers hailed from a half-dozen different theatrical idioms: a couple of clowns, a pair of grooving dancers, a woman in a gown obsessed with an operatic death scene, an actor in a gorilla suit tossing popcorn at the audience, two rock-gig roadies who played air-guitar and imposed smoke-effects and flashy lights on the others. These figures collided, competed for attention, and confided their various incompatible desires to the audience.



Bloody Mess, Forced Entertainment, 2003. Photo: Hugo Glendinning/Courtesy Forced Entertainment.

In a public lecture in Portland, Etchells said (quoting Baudelaire) that his company's basic relationship to the theatre was like "the child's elemental relationship to the toy: how can I break this?" Forced Entertainment's fundamental impulse, he said, was "to pick [the theatre] up and start banging it or clanking it against the wall or throwing it up in the air to see what happens to it, what kind of things can be done with it, what kind of relations can be constructed with it." The company's "breaking" impulse has been twofold, he added. On the one hand, they have overloaded theatre with "more than it can possibly hold," more people, objects, layers of material, strands of image or text, as in the pieces just mentioned. On the other hand, they have emptied theatre out, "slimming it down to almost nothing, to a few people or even one person on a nearly bare stage," absorbing tedium and "social breathing" into the experience, as in the pieces done at the TBA Festival.

When he speaks like this, Etchells sounds like an acolyte of Samuel Beckett, despite his evident disdain for the words "play" and "playwright." One gathers that impression as well from reading his remarkable collection of essays and performance texts, *Certain Fragments* (1999), which contains more original and provocative thought about the nature of pared-down performance than I have seen from anyone else currently employing it (including New York figures like the playwright Tom Donaghy and the playwright-director Richard Maxwell, whose work Etchells admires). Forced Entertainment's smaller, quieter pieces are grounded in the decidedly Beckettian circumstance of actors deprived of fixed roles to rely on, and that circumstance, along with their air of melancholy and mortality, operates as an unbalancing force that keeps the audience constantly curious about what will happen next and uncertain how to measure the basic stakes of the action.

Beckett famously wrote that "to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion." In 2001, Etchells and Matthew Goulish, a member of the Chicago-based performance group Goat Island, co-founded a quasi-fanciful think tank called Institute of Failure whose published manifesto explores the imaginative energy generated by various disasters and mishaps, both famous and obscure, such as design changes incorporated into the Tower of Pisa when it started to lean, or unforeseen consequences of the Oregon State Highway Department's 1970 explosion of a dead beached whale. Etchells sees himself as a sort of anti-maestro, spinning theatrical gold out of the chaff of castoff experience: the undone, the hapless, the incompetent, the incomplete. "You get up there (you come up here) and you fail. And in that failing is your heartbeat," he writes in the manifesto.

Forced Entertainment has devoted fans among the theatre intelligentsia. Richard Schechner once told an interviewer he'd prefer to be stranded with this company more than any other on a desert island. The most far-fetched compliment about them I've read was by Hans-Thies Lehmann in a 2004 essay that earnestly compared the group's achievement with Shakespeare's. Lehmann observed purportedly eye-opening coincidences, such as: Shakespeare and Forced Entertainment's common interest in unstable identity; the way the stories they tell are interrupted and taken up again,

often shifting between jesting and lofty seriousness; their common trust in words over pictures; and a certain feeling of “*Welt-Fülle* (fullness of the world),” attributed to their games with layers of reality. To put it mildly, this comparison seemed preposterous to me when I first read it—like comparing an automobile with a skateboard merely because both happen to have four wheels. It was very strange indeed, then, to find that the works at the TBA Festival to some extent changed my mind.

One of Etchells’s splintered approaches to text has been to construct it in the manner of a catalogue or list. Both *Quizoola!* and *Sight Is the Sense That Dying People Tend to Lose First* belong to this class of works, which I had never seen before, in which the performers utter long lists of similarly phrased statements or questions, either from memory or read from sheaves of papers. In *Sight Is the Sense . . .*, Jim Fletcher—a member of Richard Maxwell’s New York City Players—delivered hundreds of declarative statements, more or less deadpan, as if patiently explaining the world to a Martian or inquisitive child.

A submarine is a ship that can go underwater. A French kiss is a kiss where you put your tongue in the other person’s mouth. A donkey is an inferior kind of horse. A lie is what people say when they say something that is untrue. A fact is something that can be proved. Tears are drops of water that come out of your eyes. Your heart is in your body. The heart pumps blood around. The pipes that carry blood are called veins or arteries. Blood is only red when it comes out of the body. Sweat is small drops of water that come out from different places in your skin. Urine is a stream of water that comes out from between your legs. Cats are frightened of dogs. Dogs like to chase cats. Some dogs like to bite the tires of a car when it comes driving along. Mice are frightened of cats.

These statements riffed off one another in both obvious and obscure ways, linked only by rough association and never developing into a story or argument or evincing any overarching progression (e.g., from simplicity to increasing complexity), which irritated at least a dozen spectators enough to walk huffily out of the hall. Fletcher seemed to have been given some binding injunction to describe the whole of human affairs, then left to wallow in his garrulous, directionless, jump-cutting effort to comply.

His statements included clichés: “There are no easy answers,” “Life is not fair,” “There is no such thing as a free lunch.” Personal observation: “Sometimes relatives take things that do not belong to them. Sometimes adults go quiet for no real reason during a celebration meal.” Political irony: “Democracy is a system where people have to put crosses in boxes using a pencil,” “Capital punishment is a good way to stop criminals from ever committing the same crime again.” Evasion: “Hate is hard to explain. Rats move in groups. Knives are things made of metal.” Moralistic advice: “Alcohol makes people feel better when they are drinking it but much worse afterwards. Children should not drink.” Practical description bleeding into life-philosophy: “Life goes on pretty much the same even when some people die. The internet is a network of computers all joined together, mainly using wires.

Computers are thinking machines. A soldier is a fighting machine. James Brown was a sex machine.” And much, much more.

Fletcher’s mild, squinting, insouciant demeanor, standing on the large thrust stage like a nobody-Everyman in sneakers and an untucked work shirt, gave the show a sweet, ruminative quality and made most of those who didn’t walk out (I would guess) want to listen. He never rushed but rather proceeded thoughtfully and seriously as if producing each statement for the first time. The text was more than six thousand words long, plainly an extraordinary feat of memorization, but that seemed less important than the strange, cumulative power of the verbal picture he spun. He often paused and gazed neutrally at the audience, at one point seeming to chide a fleeing spectator with the remark “A fart is gas that escapes from a body.” The timing there was coincidental, though, the moment ambiguous, making him seem equally resourceful and trapped in patterned response. By the end, the suggestion of purgatory was patent—the actor as specter of unaccommodated Man enjoined to define and defend himself to an unknown and unknowable judge, with nothing but the poor resources of declarative language at his disposal. At first the audience laughed lustily, but their snickers and guffaws gradually modulated to titters and snorts, then to murmurs and whispers, and finally to silence.

Quizoola! had different ground rules, involving three actors (Etchells, Fletcher, and Kent Beeson), no memorized speech, and a combination of reading and improvisation. It was also six hours long rather than fifty minutes (the audience was told it could come and go whenever it liked) and took place not on a formal stage but in an old, partly demolished industrial space with a long undraped window facing the street. Two plain wooden chairs were placed inside a circle of bare light bulbs, and within that circle the actors, who always appeared two at a time with their faces smeared in clown makeup, periodically exchanged the roles of questioner and questioned. One read from a list of 2000 questions, printed on dog-eared pages frequently dropped on the floor, and the other provided spontaneous, unscripted responses. The questions ranged from quiz-show trivia (“David Soul of *Starsky and Hutch* fame supports which English soccer team?”) to personal opinion (“Who do you really hate?”) to encyclopedic fact (“Who were the Vikings?”) to temporal fact (“What time is it in West Africa now?”) to pub chat (“Do you work the night shift?” “Can you tell what people are thinking?”). (And much more.) The manner of questioning ranged from listless recitation to friendly inquiry to vicious badgering.

Unlike with *Sight is the Sense*, no fictional circumstance (such as speaking with a Martian) immediately suggested itself with *Quizoola!* The conversation was in progress as the spectators entered, the slowly fading daylight through the window emphasized the passage of real time, and (the clown makeup notwithstanding) one had the sense at first of accidentally intruding on a private actors’ exercise that outsiders were bound to find somewhat tawdry. Why were these questions being asked? What was the imperative behind them? Did their content matter at all? And what, if anything, constituted good and bad answers? Such puzzles were plainly unsolvable, as the premise was clearly a game that strictly followed certain rules.



Jim Fletcher in Tim Etchells's *Sight is the Sense that Dying People Tend to Lose First*, Portland Center for Performing Arts, 2008. Photo: Tim Etchells. Courtesy Forced Entertainment.

The rules were easy to discern: some sort of answer to each question was required, if only a dismissive one. And the questioner could follow up only with questions, never statements, even if answers were phrased as questions to invite ongoing conversation. Periodically the questioner would ask, “Would you like to stop?” and the roles would switch if answer was yes.

The sneaky aspect of *Quizoola!*, if I can put it that way, was that it did allow relationships to develop between the actors even though the one-way questioning format seemed designed to inhibit that. It was a quiz show from hell (or a psychotherapy session from hell, or an interrogation from hell) except that the “host” (or therapist, or interrogator) could not be truly detached or aloof because that role kept changing hands. Furthermore, the players coped with so many different subjects, implications, insinuations and attitudes that not just their knowledge but their breadth and depth of human experience were harshly tested. (It was like a contest for who could exhibit, as Dryden famously said of Shakespeare, “the largest and most comprehensive soul.”) The actors’ exposure was theoretically limitless, since they had no protection from the hypothetical infinitude of question areas and they evidently felt obligated to compete with each other *as actors*—i.e., for who could be most interesting and engaging. The true substance of the action was the gradual revelation of their characters and sensibilities through their improvised answers and their manner of dealing with each other in various combinations.

They were a motley crew, with very different physiques and personalities. Fletcher, who looked to be in his mid-forties, was tall, slow, deliberate, and brooding. Beeson looked about a decade younger, was short, stocky, candid, and articulate. Etchells, late-forties, was of medium build, balding, wry, and confident. Everyone knew Etchells had conceived the piece and written the questions, so he had the upper hand in many ways. He readily strung together questions that amounted to judgmental harangues, for instance: (Fletcher: “I love Mariah Carey.” Etchells: “Oh yeah, what do you mean you love Mariah Carey? Are you part of Mariah Carey’s street team? Do you log onto forums on-line and make casual comments about Mariah Carey?”). He also freely veered from earnestness to sarcasm and back again.

BEESON: How many scars do you have?

ETCHELLS: A lot.

BEESON: Which one do you like the best?

ETCHELLS: I’m kind of past liking any of them much. I have a sternotomy scar where they cut down through my rib cage in order to do heart surgery. So that was fairly dramatic. I have another one in my neck from where they did a biopsy. And I have two or three on this side from pacemaker operations. . . .

BEESON: Which is faster, a cheetah or a gazelle?

ETCHELLS: A gazelle.

BEESON: Which is faster, a cheetah or a gazelle?

ETCHELLS: A gazelle.

BEESON: What do cheetahs eat?

(Pause. Laughter from audience.)

BEESON: What do cheetahs eat?

ETCHELLS: Um, antelope. *(Pause, more laughter.)* Or monkeys, many monkeys. *(More laughter.)*

BEESON: You really believe that?

ETCHELLS: Yeah. They eat children.

BEESON: Whose children?

ETCHELLS: The ones that people leave in their car with the windows open.

[Note: quotes are from notes I took during the performance.—JK]

Beeson came off as contentedly subordinate to both Etchells and Fletcher, resigned to play straight man or assert himself occasionally through flashes of cleverness and contradiction. Fletcher, in contrast, posed persistent and determined challenges to both the others with passive-aggressive self-absorption, controlling the pace of the conversation with long pauses.

ETCHELLS: Do you think Leonardo Di Caprio would make a good King Lear?

FLETCHER: I think he's *(Long pause.)* very pretty. And he tends to be solemn. And *(Long pause.)* maybe he would make a good King Lear but I don't think so.

ETCHELLS: Do you think people have sexual fantasies about John McCain and Sarah Palin?

FLETCHER: Yes.

ETCHELLS: What kind of fantasies?

FLETCHER: I think *(Very long pause.)* I think people have a lot of fantasies about Sarah Palin. And I think John McCain gets dragged in there by proximity. *(Audience laughter.)*

ETCHELLS: Do you think that some of the FBI guys around also get dragged in?

FLETCHER: *(Long pause.)* I never thought about it but now that you mention it, maybe. FBI guys.

ETCHELLS: How much would I have to pay you to eat a plate full of my shit?

FLETCHER: *(Very long pause.)* I would . . . I would do it for \$2,000. *(Laughter.)*

A favorite topic among the many critics who have written about *Quizoola!* is the ambiguity concerning whether the answers are fictional or drawn from the actors' lives. A number of answers in the performance I saw certainly sounded autobiographical (such as Etchells's description of his scars) but there was no way to tell for sure, and that sort of uncertainty has been frequently read as a neat trope for the duplicity of the theatre in general, a signature theme of Etchells. There is something

arid and unsatisfying about appreciating such a grueling marathon show primarily for such abstract reasons, however. What seems to me the true “plot” of *Quizoola!* is the actors’ arc of invention, and their arc of exhaustion, as they move through what becomes a rather brutal endurance trial. This is the story that asserts itself and stands in for the organization and development that never arise in the questions and answers. (I watched the show for the whole six hours, incidentally, not because I intended or wanted to, but because the line outside for re-entry was so long that leaving meant waiting hours to return.)

Each actor endured the physical and emotional strain differently, but each also did his best to measure up to the nonstop onslaught of queries ranging across the vast expanse of human affairs. When their creative energy flowed, the performers grew expansive, eloquent, and funny, and when it flagged they grew curt, glib, and evasive. The clown makeup lent them a slightly pathetic, self-sacrificial air. I made a note to myself at one point that the waxing and waning of their exertions (their strivings, as Goethe’s Faust might call it), which were obviously doomed to failure, resounded as a poignant echo of life as a whole.

Which brings me back to Lehmann’s comparison with Shakespeare. What *Quizoola!* and *Sight is the Sense that Dying People Tend to Lose First* principally shared was their quixotic effort at comprehensiveness. That is the ambition that can be meaningfully held up against Shakespearean *Welt-Fülle*. Both works took on the absurdly monumental task of limning a complete world, in all its bewildering variety and ungraspable detail. More precisely, they each set theatrical traps for such a world through an absurdly prolonged and obsessive gesture of listing. The daring behind that effort was astonishing and endearing, in no small part because it was bound to fail. After all, fashioning a complete world is really a craving from another era—from Shakespeare’s or Dickens’s time—and those who attempt it today tend to be Apollonian novelists, not low-budget, warehouse-dwelling, experimental theatre-makers with spiritual ties to Beckett. Against all our puny expectations, Etchells’s sly, humble, postdramatic art serves momentous ends.

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Jim Fletcher and Kent Beeson in Forced Entertainment's *Quizoola!*, The Works at Leftbank, Portland, Oregon, 2008. Photo: Tim Etchells. Courtesy Forced Entertainment.